

VZCZCXRO8858  
PP RUEHPA  
DE RUEHUJA #0099/01 0161330  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 161330Z JAN 09  
FM AMEMBASSY ABUJA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5054  
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE  
RUEHSA/AMEMBASSY PRETORIA 1625  
RUEHYD/AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE 0602  
RUEHOS/AMCONSUL LAGOS 0667  
RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE  
RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHDC  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC  
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC  
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE  
RUZEJAA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000099

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/W, INR/AA  
DOE FOR GEORGE PERSON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/14/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [ECON](#) [EPET](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: SENATOR SARAHI ON CABINET RESHUFFLE,  
CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM, PRESIDENT'S HEALTH

Classified By: Political Counselor Walter Pflaumer for reasons 1.4. (b  
& d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Poloffs met with Kwara State Senator Gbemisola Saraki-Fowora (sister of Kwara State Governor Saraki) of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) at her Abuja residence on 13 January to discuss the cabinet reshuffle, constitutional reform, and President Yar'Adua's health. While Saraki was optimistic regarding the capabilities of the President's hand-picked cabinet, the Senator, who serves as the Vice Chair for the Joint Committee on Constitutional Review, did not hold out much hope for significant meaningful constitutional reform. She is an enthusiastic supporter of the President, even going so far as to say Yar'Adua will remain in office until 2015. END SUMMARY.

Infrastructure-Related Ministers Have Better Access to President  
-----  
-

12. (C) Saraki said Yar'Adua limits his interactions with ministers much more than former President Obasanjo, and that he put an end to the constant stream of ministers into the Villa. Instead, Yar'Adua meets with a group of key ministers including the Minister of Transport, Petroleum, Aviation, Power, and Finance on regular basis, while the remaining ministers rely on the weekly Federal Executive Council (FEC) meetings to communicate with the President. She assessed this small group of five or six ministers had greater access to the Villa because Yar'Adua wants to be able to show improvements in key infrastructure such as railroads and electricity to minimize any hurdles the PDP might face in the 2011 elections. She referred twice to "when Yar'Adua leaves office in 2015." (Comment: One of the ministers the Senator described as having greater access to the Presidency is Minister of Transport Ibrahim Bio. Bio is from the Senator's home state of Kwara; he served as the Speaker of the State House Assembly prior to his appointment as Minister of Transport.)

13. (C) Saraki said Yar'Adua's trip to Saudi Arabia in August 2008 and the ensuing controversy over his health had prompted him to replace his initial, PDP-selected cabinet, a move long promised. She maintained that Yar'Adua personally selected the new cabinet, and only allowed the PDP and the governors to object to appointments if they had "serious concerns" about his nominees. In particular, the Senator said

Yar'Adua selected the new Minister of Information and Communications Dr. Dora Akunyili because she "likes to talk" and could help the President communicate with the press, a skill the President puts more stock in following the extensive speculation in the media surrounding his trip to Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, the Senator also explained that the President's reluctance to discuss health-related issues was rooted in his Fulani culture and would be hard to overcome.

14. (C) The Senator also discussed the difficulties many ministers are having adjusting to the President's hands-off management style. Many ministers are accustomed to former President Obasanjo's more authoritarian tendencies and are not used to making decisions on their own. For example, she said Yar'Adua does not want to be bothered with ministers seeking his approval for every decision, and therefore has even increased the value of contracts which can be approved by the ministers without FEC concurrence. That said, Saraki maintained Yar'Adua is "very firm" on keeping ministers within their budgets and will not allow any deviation -- another cultural change for ministers more accustomed to Obasanjo's style of not abiding by budgetary constraints.

#### Constitutional Reform Faces Significant Hurdles

15. (C) Saraki, who is the Vice Chair of the Joint Committee on Constitutional Review, said competing interest groups and procedural difficulties are making it difficult to pass meaningful amendments. She feared the exercise would instead become bogged down with controversial amendments such as the

ABUJA 00000099 002 OF 002

creation of new states and the formation of state police units. Although she said she believes removal of the immunity clause is a necessity, she maintained there is little chance it would ever pass. She commented that many governors are in their first term and would use the state assemblies to suppress any attempt to revoke immunity. (FYI: The immunity clause refers to section 308 of the 1999 constitution which says no civil or criminal proceedings can be initiated against the President, Vice President, Governors, and Deputy Governors while they are in office. The constitution also stipulates that two-thirds of both houses in the National Assembly and two-thirds of the State Assemblies have to approve a constitutional amendment before it becomes law. End FYI.) In addition, the fact that all constitutional amendments are bundled prior to being sent to the state assemblies for approval means the immunity clause revocation will almost certainly not be included so as not to torpedo the other amendments. Saraki's recommendation was to tackle constitutional reform by seeking approval for no more than five "easy," non-controversial constitutional amendments first. "We need to send a up a test balloon," she maintained, as the process for amending the Constitution has never been successfully used. Saraki stated several times that she believes Yar'Adua's hands-off approach offers a unique opportunity to the National Assembly to institute significant reforms, both constitutional and legislative, as well as to increase the role and influence of the Assembly.

#### President,s Personality Fuels Health Rumors

16. (C) The Senator characterized the President's health as "not good," but she did not believe he was seriously ill. In fact, she asserted Yar'Adua's hands-off management style and reclusive inclinations often were the root cause of rumors about his health. When "big men" seek to meet with the President and are turned down, she maintained, they assume he must be really sick. She characterized the President as a typical Fulani who was stubborn, unwilling to talk about his health, and reluctant to consider his health as a political issue. She added that Yar,Adua was an introvert and kept the Villa "quiet" (as opposed to full of guests and visitors), which only increased speculation about his health.

What Next for Senator Saraki?

- - - - -  
17. (C) The Senator denied press reports that she harbors ambitions to succeed her brother as the Governor of Kwara State, saying she did not want to go back to "the country." Instead, she said she hopes to take advantage of the President's hands-off management style to increase the National Assembly's influence, a trend she sees as improving the prospects for democracy and good governance in Nigeria. She even mentioned mirroring her brother's success with the Governor's Forum and establishing a pressure group within the National Assembly.

Comment

- - - - -  
18. (C) Saraki eloquently and engagingly continued to echo her family's support of the Presidency as she has in previous meetings with USG officials -- to the extent that her support bordered on a "prefab" monologue. Her support for Yar'Adua may also be rooted in the absolute disdain she holds for Obasanjo, which she makes no attempt to hide. We believe that Saraki's comments on the state of Yar'Adua's health should be viewed within the context of her (and her family's) relationship with Yar'Adua and may be more a reflection of the administration's public position on his health than Saraki's personal views. Regardless of Saraki's true plans for her own future, her family's influence with the Presidency and growing network of powerbrokers will make it easy for her to remain politically relevant.

19. (U) This cable was coordinated with Consulate Lagos.  
Piascik